

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Hutchings, Peter (2008) American vampires in Britain: Richard Matheson's 'I am legend' and Hammer's 'The night creatures'. In: Sights Unseen: Unfinished British Films. Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 53-70. ISBN 978-1847184269

Published by: Cambridge Scholars Press

URL:

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/1299/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



UniversityLibrary

CHAPTER THREE

AMERICAN VAMPIRES IN BRITAIN: RICHARD MATHESON'S *I AM LEGEND* AND HAMMER'S *THE NIGHT CREATURES*

PETER HUTCHINGS

I Am Legend: On (and off) screen

"Begone! Van Helsing and Mina and Jonathan and blood-eyed Count and all." (*The Night Creatures*)

The story of the relation between the vampire novel *I Am Legend* (1954) and horror cinema is, to put it mildly, convoluted. It begins in 1957 with the American horror and fantasy writer Richard Matheson, who was responsible for writing the novel in the first place, coming to Britain to prepare a screenplay adaptation for Hammer Films. Hammer had just had a notable success with its first colour gothic horror film, *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), which had starred Peter Cushing as the scientist and featured a then unknown Christopher Lee as the creature, and the company already had *Dracula* (1958), its next gothic horror, in pre-production. In retrospect, Matheson's tale of a contemporary world overrun by vampires seemed to sit somewhat uneasily within this period horror context, but these were early days for Hammer horror and the company's distinctive gothic format had not yet been fully established. In any event, Matheson completed his screenplay, with the title *The Night Creatures* replacing the more cryptic *I Am Legend*. *Dracula*, Hammer's other vampire film, went on to become a huge commercial success and confirmed the company's status as a leading purveyor of horror. By contrast, *The Night Creatures* went no further than Matheson's screenplay. The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) made it clear to Hammer that any film of the screenplay would be rejected outright, while the slightly more muted Motion Picture Association of America complained, in a letter dated 4 December 1957,

about the screenplay's "over-emphasis on gruesomeness."¹ Hammer promptly abandoned the project.

Like any good vampire, the *I Am Legend* story refused to die easily, however. An economical Hammer sold the screenplay to American producer Robert Lippert, with whom the company had had an association throughout much of the 1950s. Lippert was subsequently responsible for the Italian version of *I Am Legend*, now retitled *The Last Man on Earth* (1964); this starred Vincent Price as the lone human fighting against a world of vampires, with direction credited to Ubaldo Ragona in Italian release prints and Sidney Salkow in American prints. In protest at changes made to his work, Matheson had his name removed from this film's credits and was billed instead as "Logan Swanson." It was the last time that he had any direct connection, even pseudonymous, with cinematic adaptations of his novel. Yet another film version appeared in 1971. This time it was *The Omega Man*, which starred Charlton Heston and was directed by Boris Sagal. A third version was mooted in the early 1990s as a vehicle for Arnold Schwarzenegger to be directed by Ridley Scott, although it was eventually abandoned because of its projected cost. More recently, directors Rob Bowman and Michael Bay have both been associated with attempts to resurrect this project. At the time of writing, the third screen adaptation of Matheson's novel—after *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man*—is finally in production under the title *I Am Legend*, with Will Smith in the lead role and Francis Lawrence as director.

The original novel *I Am Legend* has over the years acquired a canonical stature within modern horror literature. It is also an acknowledged (by Romero himself) influence on George Romero's seminal modern American horror film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Given this, the possibility that the first, and the most faithful, screen adaptation of this horror classic might have been produced in 1950s Britain is undoubtedly tantalising. If *The Night Creatures*, the only screen version of *I Am Legend* to be scripted solely by Matheson, had actually been filmed by Hammer, would our understanding both of British horror and of the wider development of modern horror cinema have been altered as a consequence? In other words, is *The Night Creatures* the one that got away, the one that might not just have changed the direction of Hammer horror at the very moment of its formation but also have introduced into horror cinema themes that in actuality were only fully realised later in the 1960s and 1970s?

¹ Cited in Matheson, *Bloodlines*, 217.

Excitable questions of this kind usually go hand in hand with critical accounts that mourn the loss of something perceived as valuable. After all, if the unrealised project does not have at least the potential to be striking and important, then what is the point in spending time thinking about it and, indeed, lamenting its non-existence? Hence the need not merely to talk about an incomplete film on the basis of what are essentially fragments – ideas, screenplays and incomplete sequences – but in some cases virtually to will the film into imaginary existence in an ideal form unsullied by those constraints and compromises that generally characterise film production. However, before we rush to install *The Night Creatures* in the canon of "unfilmed greats", it is instructive to note the response to its abandonment of some of the key figures involved in its creation. Val Guest, who had been signed to direct the film, did not even mention it in his 2001 autobiography *So You Want To Be In Pictures*, while the Hammer producer Michael Carreras reflected ruefully that "from that moment on, we never made a film without submitting the script first",² and Matheson himself grumbled "I got very little of the deal back then. I got a trip to England out of it and some pocket change".³ There is not much in the way of artistic lamentation here then but instead just expressions of annoyance at the time and money wasted on the project. It is precisely the attitude that one might expect of jobbing directors, producers and writers, all of whom had busy careers and quickly moved onto other projects after *The Night Creatures* was closed down.

Locating *The Night Creatures* in relation to the working practices of those people who tried to make it has the potential to offer a more nuanced account of the project. This is likely to involve less emphasis on speculation about the loss to British cinema and horror cinema that the film's non-completion might have entailed and instead a focus on what might be thought of as the presence of *The Night Creatures* in British cinema, with a different set of questions consequently emerging. Why was Hammer interested in the project in the first place? Why did it go to the trouble of bringing Matheson over from the United States? What does this suggest about the pattern of production within the company during the late 1950s and, more broadly, about the relation between British and American models of horror and indeed between horror literature and horror cinema? Such questions direct us to *I Am Legend* as a commercial property as well as an innovative horror text, and a consideration of the circumstances of its acquisition and development by Hammer can enhance our understanding

² Meikle, *A History of Horrors*, 56.

³ Matheson, *Bloodlines*, 210.

of the relation between these two distinct aspects of its existence. A logical starting point for this is the original novel itself.

I Am Legend as Modern Horror Text

The narrative of *I Am Legend* revolves around Robert Neville, the lone survivor of a mysterious plague that has converted the rest of the population into vampires. Neville spends his nights besieged in his fortified house and his days staking as many vampires as he possibly can. Eventually he discovers that vampirism is caused by a bacillus, and that a group of the infected have worked out how to contain and live with their disease. The novel concludes with Neville committing suicide as he realises that in a world of vampires, the one "normal" human has become the monster: "Full circle, he thought while the final lethargy crept into his limbs. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new supersituation entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend."⁴

Mark Jancovich has identified Matheson as a key American horror writer who during the 1950s "brought together the elements which would distinguish modern horror literature and differentiate it from the horror writing of earlier periods." Jancovich adds, "Normality is always relative within his fiction and, usually, it is monstrous. For these reasons, his fiction displays a general concern with paranoia, loss of control and estrangement."⁵ Such a reading of Matheson's fiction works well for *I Am Legend*, with its relativisation of normality and its emphasis on the increasingly disturbed psychological state of its main protagonist. Moreover, this all takes place within a recognisable modern setting and is accompanied by an apparent debunking of what might be termed traditional horror conventions. There is a moment in the novel – a moment preserved in *The Night Creatures* – where Neville casts aside in disgust a copy of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The old model of vampirism will not do anymore, it seems, and in the course of the narrative it is supplanted by a scientific-rational explanation of the vampire. This, along with the novel's post-nuclear war setting, has often seen *I Am Legend* classified as science fiction, as if Neville's own science-based investigation has successfully dispelled the old legends. However, this process of demystification only goes so far, as the novel's conclusion effectively installs a new version of the legend and a new monster.

⁴ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 160.

⁵ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 130.

I Am Legend emerges from this as a thrilling and innovative take on vampirism that features many of the properties that would subsequently be associated with post-1960 horror cinema, especially in its American version. Historians of the horror film have commonly distinguished pre-1960 horror from post-1960 horror on the basis that the former tends to present scenarios in which good and evil are separable and distinct and where good usually prevails, while the more modern forms of horror offer an uncertain world where normality itself is harder to identify or value positively and where the forces of good do not always intervene successfully. The transition from one to the other is obviously not meant to be seen as instantaneous but instead in terms of a gradual shifting of emphases, with the 1960 date invoked more as a marker of transition than as a moment of absolute change and also because it was the year that saw the release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, a key early text in the modern horror canon.

The ways in which these two periods in horror's development are outlined and discussed vary from one genre history to another. For example, Andrew Tudor has applied the terms "secure" and "paranoid" to the two periods, while Isabel Cristina Pinedo offers instead the terms "classical" and "postmodern".⁶ However, along with other writers on horror, they tend to emphasise particular horror films as crystallisations of key themes of the modern period. Although there is nothing intrinsically American about "paranoid" or "postmodern" horror, many of these films tend to be both American and from the late 1960s or 1970s – among them *Night of the Living Dead*, *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *It's Alive* (1974), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977).

It might be argued that the existence of a very "paranoid" or "postmodern" *I Am Legend* in 1954 underlines the shortcomings of an approach to any genre that focuses just on one medium – in this instance, cinema – rather than considering both how a genre might exist across different media and how these media relate to each other. Instead of seeing *I Am Legend* as an isolated example of a radical new approach to horror, one can readily place it, as distinguished and original as it is, within a predominantly literary but also cinematic context, as part of a collective response to social and cultural change within the United States.⁷ The novel's combination of science fiction and horror themes was also

⁶ Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 211–24; Pinedo, *Recreational Terrors*, 14–16.

⁷ For a discussion of this context, see Jancovich, *Rational Fears*.

common in the decade, especially in U. S. cinema where films such as *The Thing From Another World* (Christian Nyby/Howard Hawks, 1951) and *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (Edward L. Cahn, 1958), among many others, proved popular (although perhaps no other text collided the genres in the provocative manner of *I Am Legend*).

If *I Am Legend* has its place within U. S. cultural history, the issue remains of its attractiveness to Hammer as a property worthy of adaptation in the late 1950s. Put another way, in what ways did *I Am Legend* make sense in the context of British cinema and British culture?

Hammer in the 1950s

The anti-*Dracula* rhetoric transferred from *I Am Legend* to the screenplay *The Night Creatures* is especially striking given that if the film had gone ahead, it would have nestled alongside *Dracula* in Hammer's production schedule. In fact, one wonders whether, for this reason alone, the scene in which Robert Neville casts aside a copy of Stoker's *Dracula* would have survived in the finished film. Be that as it may, the association of *I Am Legend*/*The Night Creatures* with *Dracula* on the grounds that both dealt with vampires seems unavoidable in retrospect, but in Britain in the summer of 1957 there were other ways of thinking about *I Am Legend*.

It is significant in this respect that Matheson came to Hammer fresh from successfully adapting another of his novels, *The Shrinking Man* (1956), as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957). Although thematically connected with *I Am Legend*, this story – of a man exposed to a radioactive cloud who subsequently shrinks away – was much more readily classifiable as science fiction, and, even before reading the screenplay of *The Night Creatures*, there is some evidence to suggest that Hammer was positioning the project in relation to its own 1950s science fiction cycle.

Hammer's two major releases just prior to the summer of 1957, when Matheson wrote his screenplay, were *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Quatermass II*. The first was a period horror shot in colour and directed by Terence Fisher, who would become the key director of gothic horror for the company. The second was a contemporary science fiction drama shot in black and white that, as directed by Val Guest, possessed realist qualities in its depiction of an alien invasion of Britain. The success enjoyed by Hammer's version of *Dracula* in 1958 ensured that the company would subsequently focus its attentions on its colour gothic product, and critical accounts of Hammer horror have commonly seen its mid-1950s science fiction cycle – which also included *The Quatermass*

Experiment (Val Guest, 1955) and *X: The Unknown* (Leslie Norman, 1956) – as a dry-run for the gothic horror to come.

Such a dismissal arguably does these films a disservice for they have a distinctive character of their own. On the one hand, they offer a peculiarly British way of dealing with an alien invasion theme that had effectively been dominated by American films throughout the 1950s. In particular, the location of these films within recognisable British landscapes and in relation to British social conventions and character types tended to bestow a realism on proceedings that helped to distinguish them from the American treatments. At the same time, however, the Hammer films also sought to connect themselves with the commercially successful American approach, primarily through casting American actors in key roles, with Brian Donlevy starring in both *Quatermass* films and Dean Jagger featuring in *X: The Unknown*. This extended a practice initially adopted by Hammer in the early 1950s when it often cast fading or minor American stars in the thrillers that were then its major output.

The absence of American accents from Hammer's colour gothics – from *The Curse of Frankenstein* onwards – along with their frequent reliance on British sources has supported readings of this type of cinema as itself quintessentially British. For example, David Pirie has characterised the British horror film, and Hammer horror in particular, as “the only staple cinematic myth which Britain can properly claim as its own, and which relates to it in the same way as the western relates to America.”⁸ In comparison, the all too obvious Americanness of *I Am Legend* stands out like a sore thumb, even from the *Quatermass* films which, for all their American leads, were adapted from BBC television serials. Fashioned right at the beginning of Hammer's transformation into a gothic horror specialist, *The Night Creatures* might reasonably be seen as the final expression of a soon to be outmoded method for engaging with the American market.

However, such proudly nationalistic accounts fail to take sufficient notice of the fact that throughout the 1950s and well into the 1960s Hammer was heavily reliant on American finance and in some instances American sources: in fact, the original idea for *The Curse of Frankenstein* had come from Milton Subotsky, an American producer. Indeed, British horror cinema of the 1950s and 1960s more generally often drew upon American talent and American material. For example, Richard Matheson himself would go on to write the psychological thriller *Fanatic* (1965) and the Satanic thriller *The Devil Rides Out* (1968) for Hammer and also co-

⁸ Pirie, *A Heritage of Horror*, 9.

write, with fellow American author Charles Beaumont, the British witchcraft drama *Night of the Eagle* (1962); the American-based director Jacques Tourneur made *Night of the Demon* (1957) in Britain with American Dana Andrews starring, and American producer Milton Subotsky set up the Amicus company in Britain, for which American writer Robert Bloch worked regularly and which later adapted U.S. horror comics for the British screen. Within such a context of transnational impurity, Hammer's purchase of *I Am Legend* and its hiring of American 'hotshot' writer Matheson fitted into an ongoing, if changeable, financial and creative engagement with the U. S. film industry.

The signing up of Val Guest as director of *The Night Creatures* was also suggestive so far as Hammer's positioning of this project was concerned. Guest was a prolific and versatile director who worked regularly for Hammer during the 1950s and occasionally in the 1960s and 1970s but never on the colour gothic series for which Hammer became famous. His Hammer films included comedies – *Life with the Lyons* (1954), *The Lyons in Paris* (1955), *Up the Creek* (1958) and *Further Up the Creek* (1958) – adventure stories – *Men of Sherwood Forest* (1954) and the prehistoric tale *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth* (1970) – thrillers – *Break in the Circle* (1955), *Hell is a City* (1960) and *The Full Treatment* (1961) – and war – *The Camp on Blood Island* (1958) and *Yesterday's Enemy* (1959). However, Guest's Hammer credits most relevant to *The Night Creatures* project were *The Quatermass Experiment* (1955) and *Quatermass II*. (Guest also directed the 1957 black and white Hammer fantasy *The Abominable Snowman* which was based, like the *Quatermass* films, on a television play by Nigel Kneale.) Both of these were science fiction-themed alien invasion fantasies that contained horror elements, especially in their representation of ghastly and fearful alien monsters. To a certain extent, they – along with their television sources – offered a type of science fiction/horror that was comparable with that offered by Matheson's *I Am Legend* inasmuch as they were all contemporary, had realistic qualities, featured anxiety-ridden scenarios, and sought to distance themselves from some of the more traditional genre conventions. They also shared a level of ambition, which in Hammer's case was connected with an upward mobility in the film industry as the company improved production values and began to move away from its beginnings in B-movie production.

It seems from this that far from being an alien intrusion into a cosy British set-up, the *I Am Legend* project did make sense in relation to Hammer's 1957 production schedule and its general way of working at that time. Moreover, this was a moment of relative fluidity for the

company with a science fiction cycle and a horror cycle in profitable co-existence. What remains to be considered is the extent to which the screenplay written by Matheson fitted into what Hammer was doing elsewhere. In other words, how successfully did a 1954 American novel translate into a 1957 British screenplay?

From I Am Legend to The Night Creatures

Setting

"We move into the soundless desertion of Hudson Town, Canada. A cheerful, if somewhat weatherbeaten sign welcomes us to 'the fastest growing community in northern Canada!'"⁹

The opening scene of *The Night Creatures* presents us with our first surprise. *I Am Legend* was set in the United States, but the screenplay relocates the drama not – as one might have expected – to Britain but instead to Canada. There is very little in the original story that would not work in a British setting, and indeed it would not take much other than an Anglicisation of some of the dialogue to convert the screenplay into a British-set project. One can speculate that in this instance Canada signifies an area that is simultaneously not the United States and not Britain; not the United States because setting a film there might appear presumptuous (and Hammer never did set a film in the United States, for all its attempts to connect with and pander to the U. S. market), and not Britain perhaps as a way of distancing some of the disturbing events of the narrative – although the fact that Hammer personnel seemed genuinely surprised when the project was turned down by the censors suggests that they did not view it as especially problematic. More likely then, it was not Britain because at the time Hammer was being pressured by its American financial backers about what was viewed as the problematic "Britishness" of its colour gothic films. In the period leading up to the production of *The Curse of Frankenstein*, there had been a flurry of correspondence between the American producer Eliot Hyman and Hammer chief executive James Carreras about the extent to which the British accents of the cast might be a problem for American audiences.¹⁰ Presumably, Canadian settings would prove less of a problem, although they were unlikely to be completely free of British accents, at least in the world of British horror. The non-Hammer

⁹ Matheson, *Bloodlines*, 221.

¹⁰ Cited in Hutchings, *Terence Fisher*, 5-6.

horror film *Fiend without a Face* (1958) – set in Canada but filmed in Britain – brought together American and British actors, and the Hammer psychological thriller *Never Take Sweets from a Stranger* (1960) did something similar. Canada seems to function there, and potentially in *The Night Creatures*, as a neutral space where Americanness and Britishness might profitably co-exist and engage with each other.

The Hero, Robert Neville

Mark Jancovich has argued that *I Am Legend* places “its readers in an uneasy relationship to Neville in which they are not only deeply involved in his thought processes and responses, but are also able to identify their limitations and omissions.”¹¹ The simultaneous closeness to and distance from Neville is achieved in the novel through a third person narration that is organised entirely around Neville’s perspective and from which he is never absent.

The Night Creatures maintains this focus on Neville, who is present in every scene, and it also makes some attempts to reproduce the interior monologues found in the novel, although this is often rather strained and associated as much with exposition as it is with character insight. In fact, the whole screenplay struggles to translate into cinematic language a literary narrative which for the most part involves one man existing by himself with very little interaction with any other living (or for that matter undead) creature. For example, the film begins with Neville dictating into a tape recorder, an activity that even he acknowledges is pointless: “I know there’s no one left but me but I set this down anyway: my history. Maybe, someday, someone will listen to it. Probably not. It doesn’t matter.”¹² There are also some lengthy voice-overs which again offer exposition and are also used to compress the lengthy time span of Neville’s scientific experiments on various vampires. A drunken monologue in which Neville sings a ditty entitled “Ohhh I’m a little vampire” gives a more direct sense of his troubled state of mind (this is also the scene in which Stoker’s *Dracula* is mocked).

More perverse, and probably the most effective use of monologue in the screenplay, is a scene in which Neville conducts experiments on a trapped female vampire, causing her what the screenplay describes as ‘agony’. This is disturbing enough – and was probably one of the many scenes that upset the censors – but it is made yet worse by the way in

¹¹ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 149.

¹² Matheson, *Bloodlines*, 225.

which Neville speaks to the vampire throughout the experiment: “You can see, can’t you. But your brain is gone. You don’t recognize yourself.”¹³ Here the fact that the animalistic vampire is clearly incapable of understanding what is being said to her bestows upon Neville’s statements a monological quality that underlines, and gives dramatic shape to, his violent subjection of her.

The first half of *The Night Creatures* also contains a series of flashbacks which economically convey Neville’s family life and the gradual spread of the plague. These provide some much-needed opportunities for character interaction, pathos (as Neville’s daughter and wife die) and fear (when Neville’s wife returns as a vampire), and are generally faithful to incidents depicted in the novel. What is lost, understandably given that it would have slowed down the film, are the novel’s lengthy opening descriptions of Neville’s daily routines, which include repairing and refortifying his house, expeditions outside, staking vampires, etc. These give a very clear sense of the character desperately clinging onto these routines as a way of staving off acceptance that his normal world has been irrevocably lost.

A sense of masculine helplessness and a kind of passive aggression is maintained, however. Although Neville experiments cruelly on vampires, he is clearly no Frankenstein (or Professor Quatermass for that matter), lacking both the focus and the indomitable will of the Hammer version of the scientist. In both novel and screenplay, he is not a trained scientist at all but instead someone who reads up on science and learns what he does learn by trial and error. (To make this more plausible, the 1964 production *The Last Man on Earth* actually made its central character a professional scientist.) While he does discover the vampire bacillus, this represents the limit of his endeavour. He finds no cure, and in any event the narrative’s conclusion reveals that some of the vampires are already aware of the nature of their infection and are working to deal with it. If anything, Neville is more like some of the weak men who populate Hammer horror, more like Jonathan Harker or Arthur Holmwood in Hammer’s *Dracula* than like the authoritative Van Helsing. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hammer did offer up the spectacle of the helpless male on a fairly regular basis – even giving him the central role in *The Man Who Could Cheat Death* (1959) and *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961) – with this functioning as a counterpoint to, and in some ways a precondition of, the powerful male authority figures who were capable of successfully

¹³ *Ibid.*, 285.

taking on the monsters.¹⁴ Weakness of this kind was usually associated with a surrender to sexual drives and desires, and although *The Night Creatures* removes *I Am Legend*'s numerous references to Neville's sexual frustration, its conception of Neville fits into this category. Neville is presented as largely reactive, prone to maudlin self-pity, and barely in control of his emotions, and the screenplay does not shy away from his unnerving habit of experimenting on and staking female vampires (with his first victim his own wife).

How this would have been manifested in a finished film is hard to say, although the screenplay's critique of Neville is consistent and unavoidable. In part, it would have been a question of casting. Canadian setting notwithstanding, Peter Cushing, the main Hammer star of the period, could undoubtedly have captured the character's tormented quality, although whether Hammer would have wanted him in a role so different from his parts in *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula* is uncertain. Apparently Matheson had thought of Jack Palance in the role, with an American accent and a brooding intense presence the attraction here. (Palance did later work for Hammer on the 1959 production *Ten Seconds to Hell* and went on to appear in numerous American and British horror films, including a creditable turn as Dracula in a 1973 television film written by none other than Richard Matheson). In an uncertain world, the casting might not have proved as ideal or as exciting, however. For example, *The Abominable Snowman*, the film completed by *Night Creatures* director Val Guest just prior to the writing of the screenplay, had featured as its American lead Forrest Tucker, who was an altogether more forgettable presence and might just have been available for Guest's next film. Of such accidents are classics made or unmade.

Vampires

The vampires in *The Night Creatures* are initially presented as a mindless, shambling mob entirely bereft of the deceptive charm or sexual allure of Count Dracula and his gothic ilk. From the perspective of the horror genre today, they actually seem to function more like zombies than they do vampires. The influence of *I Am Legend* on Romero's classic modern zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* has already been mentioned, and much of what Romero took from Matheson's novel is preserved in *The Night Creatures*. It is interesting in this respect that the scenes depicting

the vampire attacks in *The Last Man on Earth*, a later version of the *Night Creatures* screenplay, look a lot like outtakes from *Night of the Living Dead*.

Of course, the vampire's bite in Stoker's *Dracula* and its numerous film adaptations is a source of infection, but it is an infection with a distinctly individualistic character. By contrast, *The Night Creatures* introduces the concept of plague – the film's opening sequence features a sign indicating that "All Plague Victims Must Be Put In The Fire" – and an uncontrollable geometric progression of the vampire disease (which here, as in the novel, is quite literally a disease) that leads inevitably to social breakdown. Other vampire films – notably F. W. Murnau's 1922 production of *Nosferatu* – also associate the vampire with plague but do not make the modern jump to vampirism as plague. This sense of escalating disorder is an unambiguous expression of what Andrew Tudor called "paranoid horror", and the fact that there is no master vampire as the source of the infection renders the threat of vampirism yet more impersonal and uncontrollable.¹⁵ In addition, the novel's vague references to there having been a war are removed from *The Night Creatures*, giving instead a sense that this disease has just happened rather than being brought on by any particular traumatic event.

I Am Legend offers a second type of vampire, however. While Neville does not distinguish between undead vampires (those mindless creatures that have actually risen from their graves) and living vampires (those infected but not yet dead), the latter turn out to have the ability to control their disease and build a new social order for themselves, one in which Neville is marked as monstrous. In setting this out, the novel establishes a sense of difference – between vampires and humans, the living and the dead – that is only partially retained in Matheson's screenplay. In both novel and film, Neville drunkenly speculates about the possibility of rights for vampires before concluding with "But would you let your sister marry one?" although this direct reference to the civil rights movement in the United States is not really followed up elsewhere in the narrative.

However, a more disturbing sense of the insurrectionary quality of the new vampire movement is made explicit towards the end of *I Am Legend* when a female vampire who is described as "a ranking officer in the new society" comments: "New societies are always primitive ... You should know that. In a way we're like a revolutionary group – repossessing society by violence. It's inevitable."¹⁶ Again, it is not clear what the

¹⁵ Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 217.

¹⁶ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 157.

¹⁴ For more on Hammer in these terms, see Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond*.

politics of the new vampire world will be – is this a left wing or right wing uprising – but nevertheless it is this sense of radical social change that provokes Neville's realisation of his own redundancy and leads to his suicide. Although the novel again makes little of it, the fact that this new world features a woman as one of its leaders, as opposed to the 1950s gender conventionality represented in the pre-plague flashbacks where men are dominant and women are housewives, is at the very least suggestive that the changes underway involve rather more than just a distinction between humans and vampires.

By contrast, the conclusion of *The Night Creatures* is much more muted and tentative. Neville is wounded during the final vampire assault upon his house but not mortally, and Ruth, the vampire woman who has infiltrated his household, reassures him that he will be safe, if not particularly popular, in the new vampire world: "You assumed that because we were infected, we'd want to kill you ... I won't lie to you, Robert. Most of my people do. But you're too valuable to kill. You [sic] immunity to the germ is worth more to us ..."¹⁷ Neville is led out of the house and driven away, and the film ends.

Clearly a lot is lost in this ending, not least the self-aggrandising "I Am Legend" moment – hence, one suspects, the title change to *The Night Creatures* – and the suicide of the hero. Also missing is Ruth's elevation to a position of authority and an accompanying sense of vampirism as a viable alternative social order. In part, this new ending is probably driven by a need for a more affirmative ending than that found in the novel, although the disturbing implication that Neville himself is about to become an experimental subject also lurks in it. In any event, it offers a decidedly ambiguous conclusion and, in dramatic terms, a fairly anti-climactic one. Arguably the hesitation apparent here manifests a broader uncertainty about how to fit some of the more disturbing and difficult aspects of the literary narrative into what passed for conventional cinematic form during the 1950s.

Another One for the Fire

Perhaps it was the dead bodies that did it. Lots of them, with Neville's house and the street outside littered with corpses by the end of the screenplay. Or perhaps it was the torture of a shackled female vampire. Or was it the municipal fire into which corpses were unceremoniously

thrown, including the corpse of Neville's young daughter? Or the contemporary settings, which somehow made this seem more disturbing than it might have been in period garb? Or the mob of animalistic vampires who entirely lacked the civilised virtues of their gothic counterparts? Or Neville's habit of referring to vampires as 'bastards'? Or the staking, or to be more precise, the multiple stakings?

Or, more probably, was it an accumulation of all these things that so upset the British censors? Hammer might have been surprised by the BBFC's displeasure, but at the time the company was relatively new to the horror genre. In any event, the critical controversy surrounding the release earlier in 1957 of *The Curse of Frankenstein* might well have prompted the BBFC to fire a warning shot across Hammer's bows. If that was the intention, it worked well, because the most noticeable consequence of the *Night Creatures* affair was that Hammer worked more closely with the censors in the future. This led to a series of exchanges throughout the 1960s and 1970s about what should or should not be cut from certain horror films that in retrospect often seem absurd and pedantic but which at the time enabled Hammer to function without costly interference from the BBFC.

This still does not address the issue of the value or likely impact of what was lost when *The Night Creatures* was abandoned. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, this is a very hard thing to ascertain, perhaps impossible given all the variables and imponderables involved in film production and reception. Not that this stops the speculation, of course (although, so far as exhibition is concerned, it is worth noting that the compromised version of the screenplay offered by *The Last Man on Earth* had no noticeable impact at all when it opened in the mid-1960s).

However, three films subsequently made by *Night Creatures* director Val Guest, for and away from Hammer, do potentially give a tangible glimpse of how he might have handled aspects of Matheson's screenplay. The Hammer production *Hell is a City* was a tough police thriller set in Manchester that featured a powerful portrayal of introspective masculinity from Stanley Baker that could readily have been transferred onto the character of Robert Neville (and if one wanted to pursue the imaginary casting route, then surely Baker as Neville is about as good as it gets). *The Day The Earth Caught Fire* (1961) was a doom-laden science fiction film in which nuclear tests cause the Earth to move towards the sun. Scenes of social breakdown accompanied by the hero's general sense of helplessness again connected with some of the material evident in *The Night Creatures*. Finally, *80,000 Suspects* (1963) dealt with an outbreak of smallpox. Here the portentous dialogue, the emotionally impaired hero and also a use of

¹⁷ Matheson, *Bloodlines*, 321-2.

voice-over, along with the theme of infection, reproduced elements present in Matheson's work.

There is no evidence at all to suggest that Val Guest was consciously responding to the loss of *The Night Creatures* in any of these films. However, if we are thinking about the project in terms of surviving fragments, these after-the-fact fragments are arguably just as evocative as Guest's earlier *Quatermass* films. This is especially the case given that *The Night Creatures* project does offer itself in certain respects as a transitional work, moving from science fiction and horror themes onto something more ambitious and desolate.

Finally, it is worth quoting one more line from *The Night Creatures*. It is not a line that appears in *I Am Legend*, although oddly – perhaps coincidentally – it does feature in *Night of the Living Dead*. On seeing a body being taken away, Neville's neighbour Ben Cortman, who will later become a vampire himself, remarks: "Another one for the fire."¹⁸ Eleven years later, at the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, a redneck sheriff delivers the same line just after the film's hero has been mistaken for a zombie and shot dead. In both instances, the line responds to an apocalyptic collapse that is draining away our emotion and empathetic humanity, with vampires or zombies functioning as an extreme expression of an inner deadness.

The presence of this evocative line in a classic modern American horror and a Hammer horror (albeit an unfilmed one) suggests that these two types of horror might not be as distinct and separate from each other as has sometimes been supposed. Such a realisation might well cut across national borders and common periodisations of horror history, but at the same time it also draws out attention to some of the localised interactions and complexities that in reality drive the development of the horror genre. It is within an impure and transactional context of this kind that *The Night Creatures*, far from being an idiosyncratic project, really starts to look like a British horror film.

Works Cited

- Guest, Val. *So You Want To Be In Pictures: The Autobiography of Val Guest*. London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2001.
 Hutchings, Peter. *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.

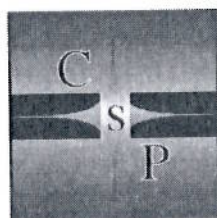
- . Terence Fisher. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
 Jancovich, Mark. *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.
 Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. London: Gollancz, 2001 [1954].
 —. *Bloodlines: Richard Matheson's Dracula, I Am Legend, and Other Vampire Stories*. Colorado Springs: Gauntlet Publications, 2006.
 Meikle, Denis. *A History of Horrors: The Rise and Fall of the House of Hammer*. Lanham, MD & London: Scarecrow Press, 1996.
 Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.
 Pirie, David. *A Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema 1946-1972*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1973.
 Tudor, Andrew. *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

¹⁸ Ibid., 233.

Sights Unseen:
Unfinished British Films

Edited by

Dan North



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY	
2006815792	CLASS No 791.430941 S16

Sights Unseen: Unfinished British Films, Edited by Dan North

This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2008 by Dan North and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-426-X, ISBN (13): 9781847184269